

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0036
DAVID LENT/MADRID

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SPAIN: FORK IN THE ROAD

ANNCR:

SPAIN IS FACING A CRITICAL DECISION WHICH MAY WELL DETERMINE THE SUCCESS OF EFFORTS TO BRING A MORE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM TO THE SPANISH PEOPLE AFTER NEARLY FOUR DECADES OF FRANCO RULE. VOA'S DAVID LENT SENT THIS BACKGROUND FROM MADRID.

VOICE:

SPAIN'S HIGHEST ADVISORY BODY -- THE COUNCIL OF THE REALM -- IS MEETING TO DECIDE ON A GOVERNMENT REQUEST TO EXTEND THE TERM OF THE PARLIAMENT OR CORTES BY ONE YEAR. ON THE COUNCIL'S DECISION HANGS THE FATE OF KING JUAN CARLOS' ANNOUNCED DESIRE TO PRESIDE OVER A GRADUAL DEMOCRATIZATION OF SPANISH POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS.

THE COUNCIL OF THE REALM IS A BODY SET UP BY THE LATE SPANISH LEADER FRANCISCO FRANCO TO ADVISE THE CHIEF OF STATE. IT IS MADE UP OF LEADING REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SYSTEM GENERALISSIMO FRANCO ESTABLISHED DURING NEARLY FORTY YEARS OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN SPAIN. IN EFFECT, THE COUNCIL IS THE GUARDIAN OF THE AUTHORITARIAN FRANCO SYSTEM. IN SOME MATTERS THE COUNCIL HAS ONLY AN ADVISORY CAPACITY BUT ON THE QUESTION OF EXTENDING THE TERM OF THE CORTES ITS ADVICE IS BINDING. IT CAN PREVENT AN EXTENSION AND FORCE ELECTIONS ON SCHEDULE IN MARCH, OF SPAIN'S PARLIAMENTARY BODY.

THE GOVERNMENT, ACTING IN THE NAME OF THE KING, REQUESTED THE EXTENSION TO GIVE IT TIME TO REFORM THE LAW BY WHICH THE

CORTES IS SELECTED. AT PRESENT ONLY ABOUT ONE-FOURTH OF THE CORTES MEMBERS ARE ELECTED AND THEY ONLY BY A RESTRICTED ELECTORATE. THE GOVERNMENT EXPLAINED ITS REQUEST FOR THE EXTENSION ON GROUNDS THAT IT WISHES TO MAKE THE INSTRUMENTS OF GOVERNMENT IN POST-FRANCO SPAIN OPEN TO BROADER PARTICIPATION BY THE SPANISH PEOPLE.

SPANISH FOREIGN MINISTER JOSE MARIA AREILZA IN A DINNER TOAST TO HIS GUEST -- AMERICAN SECRETARY OF STATE HENRY KISSINGER -- SAID ON SATURDAY THAT SPAIN IS BEGINNING A PROCESS OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND AMENDMENTS THAT WILL PROTECT THE SYSTEM'S POLITICAL FREEDOMS. HE SAID, SPAIN'S FIRST POST-FRANCO GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO DEVELOP AND PERFECT THE EXISTING INSTITUTIONS WITH DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION BY ALL ACTIVE ELEMENTS OF SPANISH SOCIETY.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE REALM WHICH GENERALISSIMO FRANCO CREATED TO DEFEND HIS REGIME AGAINST CHANGE AFTER HIS DEATH, MAY WELL REJECT THE REQUEST OF THE KING'S GOVERNMENT. A SERIES OF EDITORIALS APPEARING IN THE LIBERAL CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT NEWSPAPER, YA -- SPAIN'S LARGEST AND MOST INFLUENTIAL NEWSPAPER -- REFLECTS A FOREBODING THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE REALM AT ITS SCHEDULED (MONDAY EVENING) MEETING MAY INDEED REJECT THE REQUEST.

"WE CANNOT EVEN CONCEIVE," THE NEWSPAPER SAYS, "THAT THE COUNCIL CAN DO ANYTHING BUT APPROVE THE REQUEST. TO DO OTHERWISE," IT CONTINUES, WOULD AMOUNT TO POLITICAL SUICIDE. DOES ANYONE THINK, "YA ASKS," THAT THE COUNTRY WOULD RESIGN ITSELF TO SUCH A DECISION? TO DENY THE GOVERNMENT'S REQUEST WOULD BE TO CONDEMN SPAIN TO FOUR MORE YEARS OF CONSTRICTION

IN REGARD TO SPAIN'S MOST REPRESENTATIVE OF ALL INSTITUTIONS -- ITS PARLIAMENT."

THE IMPLICATION IS THAT SPAIN COULD IMMEDIATELY FIND ITSELF IN A STATE OF CONFRONTATION. ON ONE SIDE -- THE BUNKER -- AS THE RIGHTIST FORCES ARE CALLED. THEY OPPOSE ALL CHANGE AND REJECT THE KING'S FORMULA FOR A GRADUAL ADJUSTMENT OF THE SYSTEM TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION BY ALL SPANIARDS IN GOVERNMENT. THEY REJECT GRADUAL DEMOCRATIZATION.

ON THE OTHER SIDE -- THE KING, HIS GOVERNMENT AND MANY SPANIARDS WHOSE RISING EXPECTATIONS OF CHANGE CANNOT BE EASILY TURNED OFF.

RECENT WAVES OF LABOR UNREST, WHICH HAVE RECEDED IN SPAIN FOR THE MOMENT, ARE ANOTHER MANIFESTATION OF THE EXPECTATIONS HELD BY MANY SPANIARDS THAT THINGS IN POST-FRANCO SPAIN WILL BE DIFFERENT. THE ILLEGAL POLITICAL OPPOSITION HAS BEEN NEARLY UNANIMOUS IN GIVING CREDIT TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR ITS GOOD INTENTIONS, BUT VOICES HAVE POINTED TO THE GROWING DISPARITY BETWEEN THESE GOOD INTENTIONS AND THE FACT THAT, LEGALLY, NOTHING HAS CHANGED SINCE FRANCO DIED LAST NOVEMBER. THE GOVERNMENT'S REQUEST FOR THE EXTENSION OF THE CORTES SESSION IS THE FIRST CONCRETE MOVE TOWARD LEGAL CHANGE.